

SCHOOL OF LITERARY CRITICISM	QUESTIONS
Moral/philosophical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whom should we judge most critically for Emily's plight: the social institutions during the American Depression, Emily's mother for her decisions, or Emily's father for his desertion?
Historical/biographical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What social and economic forces at work in the 1930s Depression could explain what caused Emily's father to leave and her mother to struggle? • Tillie Olsen was born in 1913 and lived through the poverty of working-class families in the mining towns and farms of the west. Because she was raising four children, working, and struggling to make ends meet, she could not concentrate on writing until she was forty. Could these experiences have influenced this prize-winning story?
Formalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is the narrator? Do you consider the narrator reliable or unreliable? Does this point of view give the story unity? • Is this story anything more than a sociological or psychological case study or a list of personal difficulties? It violates many principles of short story writing as it summarizes nineteen years of a person's life. What makes this story "literature"? (Pay special attention to its narration, its language, its structure, and its imagery.)
Rhetorical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With which characters are you in greatest sympathy? • How did the author manipulate your feelings? • Did she "load the deck" for some and against others?
Freudian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What particular events in Emily's life do you consider most influential in the development of her personality? • Could this story be a psychological case study? Does the pain and guilt of the mother influence the way she sees the world of her child? What is the effect of reading this story of self-blame and self-justification on you?
Archetypal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This story has become a classic of the modern American short story. Do you find any mythical patterns here that would explain its lasting appeal? Could you identify the mother with one of the archetypal characters such as the good mother or bad mother, or the heroine struggling on her personal journey through motherhood? • Would you have preferred that this story have more of a fairy-tale ending, like "Cinderella," in which Emily suddenly tries on the glass slipper, transcends her difficult childhood, and dances happily and wholly with the prince?
Feminist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What conclusions can we draw from the fact that the mother is never named? She seems to feel as though she had little control over her own or Emily's life. Why might that be so? • What role do the two fathers play in Emily's life? How do they fulfill the expected parenting roles for males at the time of the story? Which of the three adults, the fathers and the mother, would you judge most harshly as a parent?
Marxist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mother clearly feels powerless to control her life and that of her daughter. Where do you lay blame for this, on the individual or the society of which she is a part? • What are the economic and social structures that create Emily's mother's terrible struggle? Does class have any bearing on her life?
Deconstructionist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do different members of the class have different interpretations of the narrator? Does her narrative contain contradictions that might lead to divergent interpretations? • Can you reconcile the narrator's exclamation—"She is so lovely. Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way."—with the last two paragraphs?
Reader response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagine an incident of behavior that might have caused the guidance counselor to call Emily's mother. Imagine Emily's reaction when she learned that the counselor had called home. Imagine how your mother would react to such a call. • Is there any incident or situation in your early life that you consider crucial in forming who you are? Have your parents ever spoken with regret about that time?
New Historical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you feel more sympathy for Emily or her mother? What would be your advice to each? • Find images from newspapers, magazines, or films from the era of the Great Depression and World War II. Can you find any clues in them to the social pressures that surrounded Emily's family and shaped their actions? • There is more than one historic context for "I Stand Here Ironing." The history on which we focus is influenced by our present histories. The story was published in 1961. Do we read it differently from the way that readers of that cultural moment would?

FIGURE 5-9 The critics and Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"

A nineteenth-century educator, William Riley Parker, observed that the typical professor of English at mid-century "was a doctor of divinity who spoke and wrote the mother tongue grammatically, had a general 'society

knowledge' of the literature, and had not specialized in this or any other academic subject" (as quoted by Graff, 1987, p. 24). For instance, as Graff notes, "of the twelve professors of English appointed by the University